

THRIFTY STOCK

I

THE girl, stormful and rebellious, had come out of the old farmhouse above Fraternity, and without much caring in which direction she turned, walked across the stubble of the freshly cut meadow toward the edge of the woods at the crest of the hill. This meadow was really a high plateau; it was fringed with bushes which grew along the crumbling stone wall which bordered it, and with birch and wild cherry trees here and there along its edge. Between these trees she could look abroad across a wooded valley, down whose middle meandered the dead water of the George's River, backed up by the mill dam at the village. There had been a light shower at dawn, scarce sufficient to settle the dust; and the air, thus clarified, lent lovely colors to the countryside. Deep green of hemlock and spruce and pine, straggling tracery of hackmatack, lighter green of the birch tops almost yellow in the heart of the woods; the blue of distant hillsides; the blue of the sky; the yellow glory of sunlight drenching everything. In an uncut strip of meadow white daisies bloomed. There were birds about. But to all these matters, Lucia Moore was oblivious. She knew only that her father was stubborn and unreasonable, her mother supine, the world at an ill turn. Drops of

water on the stubble wet her ankles; dust and water combined to muddy her impracticable shoes; an occasional bramble tore at her silken stockings. She came to the stone wall at the brink of the hill and chose a large boulder half-shaded by an apple tree that was all run to suckers, and sat down on it, her feet propped upon a stone below, her elbows on her knees, her chin cupped in her hands. The girl's eyes were sulky, and her lips pouted. There was a hint of color not their own upon these lips of hers, and her eyebrows were plucked to a thin line, their smooth arch distorted by the frown she wore. Her gingham dress was short, and her present posture revealed her thin, unformed legs, which confirmed the almost emaciated slimness of her figure. She stared unseeingly across the lovely land.

Down the slope below her and to the right, Johnny Dree was dusting his orchard. His well-trained team knew their work; they drew the sledge on which he had secured the dusting machine up and down between the wide-spaced rows; and Johnny himself controlled and directed the blast of dust which smothered the trees, depositing itself on every leaf and twig. Now and then, at the turnings, he called a command to the horses; or ran ahead to tug at their reins. He was doing two men's work, and doing it with very little effort. His voice, pitched musically, carried far across the still hillside on this quiet morning; and the whir of the duster carried further. The spouting clouds of heavy dust rose above the trees, to settle swiftly down again. Lucia Moore heard his voice, heard the duster's purring, punctuated by

the bark of the exhaust; she looked in his direction and saw the violently spouting dust, and wondered who he was and what he was doing. She had an uncontrolled curiosity, and after a few moments her awakened interest brought her down the hill. She entered the orchard at the side where the Wolf Rivers were planted, a hundred trees of them, the fruit already filling and coloring. Johnny's father had set out this small orchard with discretion; a hundred Wolf Rivers, a hundred Starks, a hundred Ben Davises. Hardy apples, easily tended, easily handled, easily marketed. Wolf Rivers for fancy trade, for the great city hotels to bake and to serve, crisply browned, with rich cream; Starks and Ben Davises for keeping through the winter. Johnny was in the middle of the Starks when he saw Lucia coming toward him among the trees. After the fashion of the countryside, he looked at her with frank curiosity. He had seen her, at some distance, once or twice before, since Walter Moore bought the run-down farm on the hilltop above his orchard. Had summarized his impressions of rouge, plucked brows, short dresses in a single phrase, "A city girl." There was no malice in the appellation; it was simply a classification. Her approach now did not embarrass him; there is a self respect in such men, not easily disturbed. She had paused between two trees at a point he was approaching, and when he came near where she stood, he stopped the horses and waited for her to speak her errand.

Lucia looked at him curiously. She was just twenty years old, but he was only two or three years older, and she was used to boys. His over-

alls were patched and faded from much washing; his blue shirt seemed fresh and clean; she thought him nice looking, and when she was sure of this, smiled most dazzlingly. Johnny tugged off his cap at that smile, and Lucia said precisely:

"How do you do?"

"Howdo, Miss Moore," Johnny replied.

Her eyes widened in a pretty affectation. "Oh, how did you know my name?"

His lips were inscrutable, but his eyes were amused. "I guess everybody around here knows you."

She pouted a little. "That doesn't sound nice."

"It don't do any harm," he said equably; and she was a little disappointed, had expected flattery. She pointed to the machine, whose engine still racketed.

"What's that?"

"A duster," he told her. "Kills the bugs on the trees."

She made a grimace. "I should think it would. But what a nasty way to do. Smother them with that dust."

He did smile this time. "The dust's poison," he explained. "It sticks to the leaves, and they eat it with the leaves, and it kills them."

"Why?" she asked.

He understood that she was interested not in the process but the reason for it. "So they won't hurt the trees; so the trees will bear better," he told her.

"Papa doesn't do that to our trees," she said.

He turned away, and she thought he smiled. "That's right," he agreed.

She looked around her. "And there are lots more apples on your trees than on ours, too."

"That's because I dust 'em and spray 'em and take care of them," he said. "You've got to treat an apple tree right if you want it to bear right."

She came gingerly to his side and inspected the duster and asked questions about it, wrinkling her nose at the smell of the dust; and he answered her questions, warming a little at her interest in that which was dear to him. She perceived that she pleased him, and pretended even greater interest, and smiled at him in her most charming fashion. Turned from the machine to the trees about them, plucked an apple and bit into it and threw it away with a grimace. His engine still coughed and barked; he showed no disposition to shut off its ignition and give his time to her. She discovered a waxy bandage upon one of the trees and asked what it was and he told her it was a graft, and would have added some explanation, but her attention flitted elsewhere.

"Where do you live?" she asked presently. "That house up there?"

"Yes."

"Is it your house?"

"My mother's and mine," he replied.

She turned the full battery of her eyes upon him. "Why haven't you come up to see a fellow?" she asked. "I've been awfully lonesome here."

He was not at all disconcerted, as she had expected him to be. "I hadn't thought of it," he said. "I'm pretty busy."

"You'll think of it now, won't you?" she begged

prettily. She was, this morning, in a reckless mood; she had been, was still, a spoiled child.

"I might," he assented, and she thought again there was a smile deep hidden in his eyes.

"I'm used to having boys crazy to come and see me," she said wistfully; and he did smile; and she was satisfied with this much of victory, and turned and ran away. She ran prettily, and she knew her skirts were none too long. From the border of the orchard, she looked back and lifted her hand to him. He touched his hat in a restrained fashion by way of response; and she ascended the hill, at peace with the world again.

And this was the first encounter between the tender of trees and Lucia Moore.

II

Her father had bought the farm during the winter from Dan Howe, who moved away to Augusta. Dan, Fraternity said, made a good thing out of it. He had paid eighteen hundred, two years before, and had sold off three hundred dollars' worth of hard wood for ship timbers, carted to Camden. The price Moore paid him was thirty-three hundred dollars. Moore had thought the figure high; but there was in the man a hunger for contact with the soil. His father had been a farm boy, had harked back to his youthful days in reminiscence during his later years. His death left Moore some fifty-two hundred dollars, and made it possible for him to escape from the small store he had run for years in Somerville, at a yearly profit less than he might have earned

as salary. He and his wife had perceived, by that time, that Lucia—they had christened her Lucy—was a problem in need of solving. Lucia liked moving pictures, and dancing, and boys, and she was not strong. Country life, they thought, would be good for her; and Moore did not cavil at Dan Howe's price. Save for a few hundred dollars, he put the remainder of his legacy, and his own savings, into a newly organized automobile company which seemed to him promising, and came to the hills above Fraternity.

Since then, he had been learning by experience that a horse which can be bought for seventy dollars is probably not worth it, and that pigs cannot profitably be raised with no milk to feed them, and that the directions in printed manuals of the art of farming are not so complete and so reliable as they seem. He was not a practical man. Even the automobile investment had turned out badly; the company was now quietly defunct, without even the formality of a receiver. And he owed a mounting bill at Will Bissell's store. If it had been possible, he would have escaped from the farm and returned to bondage; but no one would buy the place, and his debts anchored him.

It was Lucia—she had, it appeared, some grain of sense in her—who suggested one day that he might raise apples. "Johnny Dree does," she explained. This was in early fall, and she had seen Johnny once or twice since that first encounter—at her instance, and not at his. Also she had asked questions, surprisingly shrewd.

Her father nodded. "He's got a good orchard," he agreed.

"He's been picking Wolf Rivers right along," said Lucia wisely. "He says you can pick the big ones, and the others will grow to make up for it, and he's going to have hundreds of barrels to sell next month."

"I've looked at our trees," her father told her. "The apples aren't good for anything but cider. Full of worms and things."

"Johnny Dree says you've got to take care of a tree," she insisted impatiently. "But he says—" She hesitated, seeking to remember the word he had used. "He says your trees are good, thrifty stock."

"It takes years to make an orchard, Lucy," he said wearily. "You're talking about impossible things."

The swift temper which sometimes possessed the girl flamed up at him. "You make me sick!" she cried. "You just sit back and let the world walk over you. You've stuck yourself with this damned farm, and now you're going to sit still and let it smother you. Why don't you try to do something, anyway? Johnny says you've got good orchard land as there is. But you just look wise and think you know it all, and won't do anything."

Her mother said wearily: "Lucy, you oughtn't to swear at your father."

"Well, he makes me mad!" the girl cried, furiously defiant. "He's such a damned stubborn fool!"

Moore wiped his forehead with his handkerchief and smiled weakly. "I guess I'm a failure, all

right, Lucia," he agreed. "You're right to swear at a father like me."

At his humility, her revulsion was as swift as her anger had been; tenderness swept her. She pressed against him, where he sat beside the table, and with her thin arm drew his head against her fleshless bosom. "You're not, either, papa!" she cried passionately. "You're always so patient with me. But I do wish you'd talk to Johnny Dree!"

He reached up to touch her cheek caressingly. "That's all right, honey," he said.

"But you will talk to Johnny?"

The man nodded, at last. "All right, Lucy. Yes, I'll talk to him."

III

Johnny Dree found a little time, even during the busy weeks of the apple picking, to go with Moore through his orchard, and to search out the trees scattered along the stone walls. He began the work of pruning and trimming them, showed Moore, and showed Lucy, how to continue it. Bade Moore plow under the thick sod around the base of each tree. "Nothing like grass to steal the water an apple tree needs," he explained. "Grass is worse than weeds." Before the snow came, much had been done. Moore said once, diffidently:

"I'd like to hire you to help me along with this, Dree!"

But Johnny shook his head. "You don't want to hire help only when you have to," he said. "I

just come up when I'm not busy at home. You can help me with haying and things, some time."

The seasons marched monotonously on. The crisp sunshine of fall days, with frost tingling in the air, gave way to bleaker weather, and then to the full rigors of harsh cold, when snow lay thick across the hills, blanketing everything. The routine of little tasks laid itself upon Moore, and upon his wife. Even Lucia, in greater and greater degree, submitted to it. But revolt was always very near the surface in the girl. One day she met Johnny Dree upon the road, and he asked in a friendly way: "Well, you getting to like it here?"

She was in ill humor that morning, and she flamed at him. "Oh, I hate it! I hate it!" she cried. "I wish to God I'd never seen this damned hole. But papa's got us into it, and we can't get out, and there's nothing to do but work and work. Sometimes I wish I were dead."

He had never heard her swear before; and he looked at her in some astonishment. She was, he thought, so small, and so serenely sweet to look upon that there was something incongruous in her profanity. But he did not speak of his thought at that time; said merely:

"Why, that's too bad. I thought you were getting to like it, maybe." And so passed on, leaving her curiously chastened by his very mildness.

There was an interminable sameness in the days. To rise early, to do the morning chores, and cook, and eat, and wash dishes, and dust, and cook, and eat, and wash dishes, and sew, and cook, and eat, and wash dishes, and read the paper, and go fumingly to bed. This was Lucia's bitter life. But

because it is impossible to hold indignation always at its highest pitch, there were hours when she forgot to be unhappy; there were hours when she found something like pleasure in this ordered simplicity of life. Now and then Johnny came in of an evening, and sat in the dining room with them all and talked with her father about apple trees; and Lucia liked, at first, to practice her small cajoleries upon him. He quickly began to call her Lucia, then Lucy as her father and mother did. She preferred the simpler name, upon his simple lips. When the snow thinned and disappeared, and new grass pushed greenly up through the brown that clothed the fields, she was stronger than she had ever been. Her arms were rounding, her figure assuming the proportions for which it was designed; and her color no longer required external application. When Johnny took Moore into his own orchards and showed him how to apply the dormant spray, and how to search out the borers in the base of the trees and kill them with a bit of wire, or with a plug of poisoned cotton, and all the other mysteries of orchardry, Lucy liked to go along, and learned to do these tasks as well as Johnny, and better than her father did. The trees, fed with well-rotted manure which Johnny preferred to any chemical preparation, and freed from the competition of the grass and weeds which had surrounded them and blanketed their thirsty roots, thrived and put out a great burst of bloom, and all the hillside was aglow with color. Lucy began to see hope of release from this long bondage here. When the apples were sold, if the market was good, Johnny thought they

might make five or six hundred dollars in a year. . . .

Then one midnight she awoke shivering in a sharp blast from her open window, and drew fresh blankets over her; and in the morning there was white frost on the ground, and Johnny came up the hill with a philosophic smile upon his face. Moore met him at the kitchen door.

"Well," said Johnny slowly. "We won't do well this year. This frost has nipped them. I guess not bearing will give your trees a chance to get a better start."

Moore accepted the calamity with mild protest. Said blankly: "No apples. Why, I've got to have something. . . ."

But Lucy was not so mild. From the kitchen behind her father she pushed past him and out upon the porch, her eyes ablaze. "No apples!" she cried, in a voice like a scream. "Why not?"

"This frost has killed them," said Johnny, his eyes hardening.

She almost sprang at him, beat on his broad chest with her fists, and tears streamed down her face. "You fool! You damned fool!" she cried. "There've got to be apples. There've got to be! You said there would be! You said if we worked, there would be! If we sprayed the damned trees! Oh, you make me sick, with your lies! Oh, I hate this farm! I hate the damned trees. . . ."

Johnny surprised her. He took her by the shoulders, gripping them till she winced. "Stop it, Lucy," he commanded.

"I won't!" she cried. "Let go of me. . . ."

"Be still your noise," he said, no more loudly

than before. But the insistence in his voice constrained her, and she began to weep bitterly, and slumped against him, shaken and half fainting. "You can't talk that way," he told her. "It's no way to talk. You got to be a sport. It's a part of the business, Lucy. Now you go in the house and wash your face and help with breakfast. I want to talk to your father. Go along."

Her father watched her; and his face was white with surprise and consternation. But Lucy turned and went obediently into the house, and he looked after her, and looked at Johnny Dree; and Johnny grinned, a little sheepishly.

"You see," he said, ignoring what had happened. "Thing is, you can raise some garden stuff, and some chickens and things, and get along. We're due for a good year next year."

Walter Moore nodded. "That's all right," he assented, and looked again at the door through which Lucy had gone. "But I'd like to shake hands with you, Dree. I'd like to shake your hand."

IV

The stoic patience of the farmer, who serves a capricious master and finds his most treasured works casually destroyed by that master's slightest whim, takes time to learn, but is a mighty armor, when it has been put on. It was Johnny Dree's heritage; it was, in remoter line, the heritage also of Walter Moore. It bore them through that summer, and through the frost-hued glory of the fall. There is a pleasure in a task well done, regardless of reward; and when Moore surveyed

his trees, he found this pleasure. Johnny Dree confirmed it. "They're like money in the bank, Mr. Moore," he said. "You can't lose it, and it pays you interest right along. We're due for a good apple year, next year."

Moore nodded. "I'm beginning to like it here," he assented. "It was tough, at first. But I'm no worse in debt than I was last year, and I ought to pull out when the trees begin to bear."

"Aye," said Johnny Dree. "You've got something to build on, now. It'll go easier, from now on."

Moore had learned many things, in these months that had gone; and so had Lucy. And so had Johnny Dree. Lucy was teaching him a thing he had never had time to learn; she was teaching him to play. When snow came, he brought her, one day, snow-shoes; and thereafter they occasionally tramped the woods together, following the meandering trails of the small creatures of the forest, marking where a partridge had left a delicate tracery of footprints in the snow, exploring the great swamp below the hill where the cedars had been stripped of browse by the moose that wintered there. He found where deer were yarded, and took her to the place, and once they caught glimpses of the startled creatures, bounding away through the cumbering snow. There was a deepening understanding between these two; when they were together she talked almost constantly, and he scarce at all; but she could read his silences, and he understood her fountain-like loquacity. Through a keener understanding, she found matters to love in these hills and woods which were his world;

she was, by slow degrees, forgetting the more obvious pleasures of her life before she came to Fraternity to dwell. They were, for the most part, as much isolated as though they lived upon an island in the sea; for, save for the nightly gatherings at Will Bissell's store, Fraternity folk are not overly social in their inclinations. Once he took her to a grange dance, and she found him surprisingly adequate in this new rôle, found an unsuspected pleasure in the rustic merry-making she would, two years before, have scorned. Johnny did not smoke, and she asked him why; he said he didn't want to waste the money. Yet once when he went to East Harbor, he brought her a flower, in a pot; and when she asked him if that wasn't wasting money, he smiled a little and said he did not think it was. One day, to torment him, she cried: "I'd give a lot for a cigarette. I haven't had one for days. Will you get me some, next time you're at the store. I don't dare buy them there."

Johnny merely smiled at her and replied: "I guess if you ever did smoke them, you don't any more."

One day her snow-shoe caught on a broken stub and threw her forward into the snow. She said: "Oh, damn!" More in jest than in anger. Lifting her to her feet, he commented:

"I shouldn't think a girl would swear much."

"I like to," she insisted. "It makes me feel good when I'm mad."

"I never could see it helped me any," he rejoined, mildly enough. But she thereafter guarded her tongue, until the necessity for restraint had

disappeared. Self discipline was one of the things she learned from Johnny.

You could hardly say they had a romance. They grew together, as naturally as stock and scion grafted by his skilful hands. They had this great community of interest in the trees which were his work, which she had come to love. Their forward looking eyes were centered on the harvest time, now a scant year away, when the fruition of their labors could be expected; and their anticipations were tranquil and serene.

They talked, sometimes, of what he meant to make of his life. "You won't always be a farmer, will you?" she asked.

"I guess I will," he told her.

"Slaving away here?"

He smiled a little. "There's a man up in Winterport," he said. "He planted some apple trees twenty years ago, and more and more since, and he's got ten thousand trees, now. I went up there two years ago on the orchard tour the Farm Bureau runs. He cleared over twenty thousand dollars, that year, on his apples. Ten thousand trees. I've only got four hundred; but I'm putting in two hundred more next spring, and more when I can, and my land is better than his, and there's more around me I can buy. It's clean work. You can learn a lot from an apple tree, and eating apples never did anybody much harm. And you've time for thinking, while you work on the trees. . . ."

She slipped her hand through his arm in understanding, as they tramped along.

In December his mother, who had suffered for

half a dozen years from a mysterious weakness of the heart, was taken sick with what at first seemed a slight cold. In early January, she died. Walter Moore and his wife and Lucy were among those who followed the little cortege to the receiving tomb where—because the frost had fortified the earth against the digging of a grave—his mother's body would lie till spring. Lucy was mysteriously moved by the pity of this; that a woman should die, and yet be kept waiting for her final sweet repose in the bosom of earth. After supper that evening, she drew on coat and heavy overshoes and muffled her head against the bitter wind that blew. "I'm going down to cheer up Johnny, mama," she said.

Moore and his wife, when the door had closed behind her, looked at each other with deep understanding. "Well," he said, "I guess Lucy's gone."

But his wife smiled through misty eyes. "She's come back to us these last two years," she said. "No matter what happens, she can't really go away again."

V

Down at Johnny's house, Lucy knocked at the kitchen door and Johnny let her in. He was washing dishes and putting them away. "I've finished supper, just finished supper," he said awkwardly.

"I wanted to comfort you, Johnny," Lucy told him.

He looked at her, rubbing his plate in his hands with the cloth. "That's—mighty nice," he said.

"You mustn't be unhappy. I don't want you to

be unhappy," she explained, still standing just within the door. She was plucking away her wraps, laid her coat aside.

"You're a mighty sweet girl," Johnny told her, rubbing his plate as though the motion of his hands had hypnotized him.

"I want to take care of you," said Lucy.

Johnny considered, and saw that she had come a little nearer where he stood. "I guess it would be nice if we got married," he suggested. "Wouldn't it?"

Lucy suddenly smiled, tenderly amused at him. Her eyes, full of tears, were dancing. "I think it would be nice, Johnny," she agreed. And moved a little nearer still. She did not have to go all the way.

The plate, unbroken by its fall, rolled across the floor toward the stove, and tilted over there, and whirled to rest like a dying top, oscillating to and fro on its rim with a sound faintly like the sound of bells.

VI

They were married in March; and as though upon a signal, winter drew back from the land, taking with it the snow; and in due time the grass burst up through the sod, and the buds swelled more swiftly, it seemed to these two, than they had ever swelled before. Yet it was not too warm; the blossoms in the orchards came in their season, and not before. And the air was full of the hum of the bees as they went to and fro upon their mysterious mating of the trees. The color of the blossoms, faintly glowing, was in Lucy's cheeks;

the wonder of the springtime in her eyes while she walked here and there with Johnny about his tasks. When the petals fluttered down, it became at once apparent that the apples had set in great profusion; and through the summer they watched the fruit swell and take form and color, and now and then they pared the skin away from an apple to see the white, sweet meat inside.

Johnny began to pick Wolf Rivers early, choosing the largest and reddest fruit; yet it seemed he had no sooner picked one apple than another swelled to take the place of two. Toward the summer's end, they knew that the crop would be enormous. And this was one of those years when elsewhere the orchards had failed, so that prices were enhanced and buyers were eager.

One day in early October, one Sunday afternoon, when Johnny and Lucy had gone up the hill to have dinner with the older folk, Johnny and Walter Moore walked into the orchard and surveyed the trees.

"A big year," Johnny said. "The biggest I ever saw. Your apples will bring you close to seven hundred dollars."

Moore nodded. "It makes me—kind of humble," he said. "It doesn't seem possible. And—it's so different from what my life has been. So great a change, these last two years . . ."

Johnny looked up at him. "You've told me," he assented. And he smiled a little. "You know, I've said to Lucy some times, you can learn a lot from an apple tree. If it's got grass and weeds around its roots, they starve it for water; and the scale and the aphids and the borer hurt it;

and the suckers waste its strength. You were kind of like that, when you came up here. You'd been crowded in with a lot of other folks—grass and weeds around you, cutting off the air and the good things you needed. And the way you lived, there were all sorts of things hurting you; no exercise, and no time to yourself, and Lucy's dancing all night, and smoking, and your inside work and all, the way the bugs hurt a tree." He smiled apologetically. "And things like that automobile stock of yours, sucking your money the way suckers drain a tree. . . ."

"That's right," Moore agreed. "I couldn't see it then; but I felt it, even then. And I couldn't believe these trees would come back, any more than I expected to be so different, myself, up here. I feel new, and strong, now. Like the trees. The suckers and the bugs and all the wasteful things trimmed out of our lives. Mrs. Moore was never so well. And Lucy . . . I have to thank you for Lucy, Dree. She used to worry me. She doesn't, now."

Johnny, looking off across the orchard, saw his wife and her mother coming toward them. Mrs. Moore erect where she had drooped, laughing where she had been sad; and Lucy, full with the promise of the greatest fruition of all. "Aye," he said, with the reverent honesty of a man who sees beauty in all the growth of life. "Aye, Lucy's like the trees. She's come to bearing now."